

JUST THE FACTS

VIOLENCE PREVENTION

AN EDUCATIONAL FACT SHEET FROM
THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION

WHAT IS VIOLENCE?

Violence is a behavior which occurs in many different forms. It may be a physical act of force which harms an individual or object. It may also occur in the form of verbal abuse, such as shouting negative or abusive words at someone. Exerting extreme control over a person with little physical strength or power, such as a small child, is another example of violence. Each of these actions have negative consequences, and endangers either/both the physical or mental well being of others.

VIOLENT ACTS AGAINST YOUTH

Experiencing violence at an early age is very damaging to a child, and puts him at risk for many other problems throughout his life. Low self esteem, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, mental illness, crime, and committing violent acts toward others are all are potential consequences for young children who are violently abused. Often, children who are physically and mentally abused grow up to be abusers themselves, and continue the painful cycle of violence.

VIOLENCE AND DRUG ABUSE

There is an intricate link between the abuse of alcohol and other drugs and the prevalence of violence. Many violent acts, such as sexual abuse, gang violence, spousal and child abuse, or homicide are traced to drug abuse by the perpetrator, or person who initiates the violence.

The victims, or those who are harmed by violent behaviors, often become drug abusers themselves to deal with the psychological and physical problems associated with these behaviors. These problems can include: physical impairment, such as a broken arm or gunshot wound; or mental problems, such as memory loss or post-traumatic stress syndrome. Perpetrators, victims, their families, and the communities they live in all suffer as a result of violence and drug abuse.

To help prevent the widespread damage caused by the vicious cycle of violence and ATOD, prevention specialists should design effective intervention programs primarily targeted at youth, or those who interact with youth. By reaching children at an early age, these at-risk behaviors may lessen or cease. It must be noted, however, that stopping at-risk behaviors with drug abuse does not necessarily change or stop violent behavior.

VIOLENCE PREVENTION ACTIVITIES

In selecting the activities for any community, prevention specialists should consider the following general principles:

Each activity should have an identified target group, a setting in which that target group is reached, and a method or strategy to accomplish the objective.

TARGET GROUPS

A target group is the group of people whom the program or activity is designed to influence. Depending on the activity, the target group may be broad or specific. For example, some activities may address adolescents who are out of school or who have a history of violent or criminal behavior. Other activities may address all young children. Activities suitable for one group may be inappropriate for another because groups and individuals vary in terms of culture, values, knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors, experience, and other attributes.

The selection of target groups should take into account the specific nature of the problem being addressed, the major goals and objectives of the program, and community characteristics. For example, members of youth gangs would be an appropriate target groups if gangs were a problem in the community.

Successful programs will have activities that address many target groups. However, this takes time, and a decision must be made about which target groups to address first. There are a few broad categories of target groups that are useful to consider.

POSSIBLE TARGET GROUPS

- ❑ General population of youth
- ❑ Youth with high-risk behaviors
 - juvenile offenders
 - youth with histories of fighting or victimization
 - drug/alcohol abusers
 - drug dealers
 - weapon carriers
 - gang members
 - school dropouts
 - unemployed youths
 - homeless youth
 - relocated and immigrant youth
- ❑ Young children
 - abused or neglected children
 - children who have witnessed violence
 - children with behavioral problems

SETTINGS

The setting is the location where a prevention activity occurs. There are four important considerations involved in selecting settings for a prevention activity.

First, select a setting where you can reach the target group. Schools, for example, may be an appropriate setting for the general population of youth, but are not an appropriate setting if the target group is youth who are no longer in school.

Second, select a setting appropriate for the strategy. A classroom curriculum probably will not be effective if administered on the playground.

Third, select multiple settings for each target group. The frequency of violent behavior is more likely to decrease if complementary messages or experiences occur in several settings and if the environment is made less conducive to violence. For example, a young boy is less likely to be violent when he is taught alternatives to violent behavior in the school, is exposed less often to violence in the home, and plays in supervised areas where fights are not likely to take place.

Fourth, when appropriate, select one setting suitable for several target groups. Churches, for example, may be an appropriate setting for both youths and parents.

STRATEGIES

Activities to prevent youth violence typically employ one of three general prevention strategies; education; legal and regulatory change; and environmental modification.

■ EDUCATION

Education provides information and teaches skills. New knowledge and new skills change or reinforce a person's

attitude and behavior thus reducing the chances that the person will behave violently or become a victim of violence. Educational efforts can be directed toward a wide variety of target groups to help convey knowledge and skills. Face-to-face teaching may occur in the classroom, in worksite or recreational settings, or through special teachers, such as nurses on home visits.

Examples of types of education strategies include adult mentoring, conflict resolution education, training in social skills, education to prevent injuries from firearms, parenting centers, peer education, and public information and education campaigns.

ADULT MENTORING

Mentors are special adults who provide a positive, caring influence and standards of conduct for young people. Mentors provide role models for young people who have none, or they offer alternatives to negative role models. Mentors may reinforce positive attitudes or behaviors that children are trying to express. Adult role models may be teachers, counselors, friends, and confidants, or simply members of the community. Mentoring activities can be conducted in almost any setting, such as schools, churches, businesses, or other community locations. The attention and interest bestowed on the youngsters by people who care enhance the youth's self-esteem and strengthen his or her ability to choose nonviolent methods to resolve conflict.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION EDUCATION

Classes in conflict resolution are designed to provide students with the opportunity to develop empathy with others, learn ways to control impulses, develop problem-solving skills, and manage their anger. Usually this curriculum is delivered in the classroom setting, although other settings, such as churches, multi-service centers, boys and girls clubs, recreation centers, housing developments, juvenile detention centers, and neighborhood health centers may be appropriate also. Courses in conflict resolution have been developed for both elementary and high school-age students.

The methods used to teach conflict resolution usually include role-playing conflict situations and analyzing the responses to, and consequences of, violence. These conflicts cover a wide range of situations, such as bullying, stealing, and spreading rumors. Teaching materials can be designed to meet individual needs of different groups of students.

TRAINING IN SOCIAL SKILLS

Teaching young people social skills provides them with the ability to interact with others in positive and friendly ways. Aspects of social skills training include maintaining self-control, building communication skills, forming friendships, resisting peer pressure, being appropriately assertive, and forming good relationships with adults. Nonviolent conflict resolution training may be included with these other social skills. Acquiring these skills provides students with appropriate standards of behavior, a sense of control over their behavior, and improved self-esteem. They may be less likely

to resort to violence or become victims of violence. These educational activities can be conducted in schools, day-care settings, after-school programs, and youth organizations.

FIREARM SAFETY

The meaning of education to prevent injuries from firearms varies from community to community. For some, this means avoiding firearms altogether and for others it means the proper handling of firearms. Activities providing education about firearm safety can be conducted in school settings and in the community. A number of educational techniques have been developed, including the use of audiovisual materials and curricula that deal with situations that involve firearms.

PARENTING CENTERS

Improving parenting skills through specially designed classes for parents can improve how the parent and child interact. The improvement in this relationship may reduce the risk of childhood behavior problems and subsequent antisocial behavior that may predispose an individual to violence in later life. Programs targeted toward parents must address the psychological needs of the parents, especially their sense of being competent parents; the parental behaviors that influence the physical and social development of their children; and the stresses and social supports that can either help or hinder parents' ability to adapt to their children's needs.

PEER EDUCATION

Programs that use students to teach their peers about violence prevention are a powerful force among adolescents and can be used effectively to help shape norms and behaviors in this group. Research on peer education for other health issues such as alcohol, cigarette, and drug use, has had positive results and shows promise for violence prevention programs.

PUBLIC INFORMATION AND EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS

Public information campaigns reach a broad audience. They draw attention to an issue and help establish acceptable behavior for a community. They also convey a limited amount of information, which by itself is rarely enough to change behaviors. Therefore, activities that provide general information to the public are most effective when combined with other activities in a violence prevention program.

There are a number of ways to inform the public through media. Some examples are public service announcements, educational video programs, appearances on public talk shows, posters, brochures, and other print materials.

■ LEGAL AND REGULATORY CHANGE

Laws or rules may lower the risk of violent

behavior or victimization. Some regulations that would help reduce injuries and deaths from violence have already been enacted, but many are neither widely known nor well enforced. In many cases, it is easier to enforce existing laws than it is to enact new laws. In other cases, existing regulations are inadequate and new ones are needed. These state laws can be located by contacting the state attorney general's office. Local laws can be found at the local police agency.

The success of making or enforcing rules depends on the willingness of the population to support and obey the rules and the ability of regulatory agencies, such as the police, to enforce them. Examples of laws or regulations intended to reduce injuries and deaths from violence include laws prohibiting the carrying of firearms in public and rules prohibiting the wearing of gang colors in schools.

■ ENVIRONMENTAL MODIFICATION

Environmental modification includes changes in both the social and the physical environments. Methods of changing the social environment of children and adolescents who may be at risk for being violent or for becoming a victim of violence include such activities as providing preschool education and appropriate or therapeutic day care programs for abused children. For older children and adolescents, this includes the provision of constructive, alternative activities, such as recreational opportunities and employment. Small, personal after-school programs that offer contact with caring adults, counseling, help with homework, and recreation can create a safe, constructive alternative to violent street cultures.

HOME VISITATION

Home visitation is an activity that provides services in the home either for an individual or the entire family. Home visitation programs performed during the prenatal and infancy years of the child focus on preventing health and developmental problems in children born to mothers who are teenagers, unmarried, or of low socioeconomic status. These activities have been found effective in preventing child abuse.

Because research shows that abused children are more likely to be violent or be victims of violence as adults, prenatal and infancy home visitation programs may be an effective long-term strategy for preventing youth violence. These programs are typically designed to meet the needs of parents for information, emotional support, stress management, and other factors that undermine parents' health habits and the care of their children.

PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

Preschool programs, such as Project Head Start, are designed to help children of low-income families develop a greater degree of social competence through developing the child's intellectual skills, fostering emotional and social development, meeting the child's health and nutritional needs, and involving parents and the community in these efforts. Preschool programs like Head Start are among the most cost-effective inner-city crime and drug prevention strategies ever developed.

THERAPEUTIC ACTIVITIES

Therapeutic activities provide medical, psychological, or other treatment for children who have been abused, injured by violence, or witnessed an unusually violent event. The provision of medical, psychological, and nurturing services helps break the cycle of violence. In addition to child and family counseling, here are several special types of therapeutic services:

Foster Care programs provide basic physical care and safety from abusive parents. They can be very effective if multiple placements are avoided and foster parents are caring and knowledgeable about the needs of the child.

Respite day care and therapeutic day care provide services in a safe, nurturing, stimulating, and organized environment without taking the child entirely out of the home. Day care programs are often the abused child's first contact with other children besides family members. This interaction helps the child adjust to the separation from parents, attain skills during play, and build self-esteem through interaction with peers.

Residential treatment programs target school-age children and adolescents with special needs, such as emotional disturbances or substance abuse problems.

Crisis management services help groups or individuals deal with the anger, fear, sadness, hopelessness, confusion, and irrational thinking associated with witnessing or being victims of violence.

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Recreational activities offer young people opportunities to spend time in a structured and purposeful environment. Recreational interventions cannot be considered a sole answer to youth violence. However, activities that provide outlets for tension, stress, or anger and opportunities for social interactions and constructive problem solving are important parts of a program with other violence prevention components. Many recreational activities are conducted with these goals across the nation in Boys and Girls Clubs, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, YMCAs and YWCAs, and local recreational departments.



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WORK/ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

Student work and volunteer activities that are supported by community organizations have a positive influence on youth. Structured job experiences and volunteer activities connect adolescents with supportive adults who act as role models, mentors, and counselors. All the parties involved benefit from this type of activity. School personnel learn about community resources, and community agency staff learn about the school system. Students learn what a community is and how a neighborhood functions while learning the roles they play in society.

■ MODIFICATION OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment does not cause violence, but it may make violent events more or less likely to occur. Some environmental modifications by themselves may appear to merely displace the undesirable behavior to another location. Better lighting on a playground, for example, may move the undesirable activity to another location in a community. Sometimes, however, the new location is less conducive to violence, more difficult to reach, or easier for potential victims to avoid. In these cases, the overall amount of violence may decrease even though some violence has merely moved to a new location.

Protective landscaping, changes in traffic flow, speed bumps, dress codes, visible identification cards, and closed-circuit television monitoring are other examples of environmental changes. Environmental change may be particularly effective when combined with educational and regulatory strategies.

CONCLUSION

Violence prevention activities are crucial to preserving children, our most valuable resource. These activities must be comprehensive in scope, targeting at-risk groups with multiple strategies in a variety of environments. Safe homes, streets, schools and communities provide the support systems children need in order to grow into healthy and productive adults.



Working in partnership with local communities to help
people be self-sufficient, experience good health and live
in stable families and communities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION RESOURCE CENTER
1030 EAST LAFAYETTE STREET, SUITE 100, TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA 32301 TEL: (850) 878-2196